

# Exploiting the World's Most Poetical Topic: Poe's Use of Women as Objects of Terror

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Edgar Allan Poe is renowned for his crafting of Gothic narratives and psychological horrors possessing the ability to convey a sense of unease and terror in his readers. This mastery of horror is achieved by utilizing an array of mechanisms, including the manipulation of sensory experience with vivid imagery and liminal ambiguity, and by his intense focus on gruesome subject matter like death and decay. Among these tactics, as is evident by his famous quote, “[t]he death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” is his use of the female characters of his stories as objects of horror (Poe). Poe's use of female characters as mechanisms of terror, such as by being buried alive or murdered, along with his highlighting or challenging of gender norms, reflects his tendency to subvert a woman's agency. This essay will analyze the use of female characters and gender norms as mechanisms of terror, as well as the power dynamics between the female characters and male narrators within Poe's stories, focusing primarily on “The Black Cat,” “Ligeia,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.”



In crafting his horrific narratives, Poe often removes the agency from his female characters and reduces them to objects for conveying terror. For example, the wife, as an unnamed female character, in “The Black Cat” goes largely unnoticed until the climax of the story in which the axe is driven into her skull, serving as the pinnacle of the narrators’ psychological break. In much the same fashion, Madeline from “The Fall of the House of Usher” is rarely mentioned throughout the story before making her paranormal reappearance at the end, again, serving as the mechanism for the narrative’s terror. In “Ligeia,” it is her almost supernatural beauty which causes the narrator such distress and restless thoughts after her death. On this point, Church argues that “at times Poe idealizes some women, but he always requires that they lose their lives to serve an interest of man,” alluding to the fact that even if women are idolized in Poe’s stories, their purpose is nonetheless reduced to mere vessels of Poe’s conveyance of horror (408). Even while alive, Ligeia’s large eyes both astonished and disturbed the narrator, and in her resurrection, it is her eyes that solidified the narrator’s horror. However, Ligeia’s sense of agency is removed by her only being perceived through the eyes of the male narrator. Jordan emphasizes the removal of agency and reduction of women to passive victims in Poe’s stories, stating that “the recurring crime in [several of Poe’s] tales is that one or more women have been criminally silenced; the speech that would allow them self-expression has been denied or usurped by male agents” (2). All three of these stories feature women who are passive characters with no agency of their own throughout the story and are only made noticeable as mechanisms of horror upon their death or supernatural transformation.

Beyond the removal of agency from the women of Poe’s stories, the traditional gender norms of Victorian society are also manipulated throughout Poe’s stories as further means of manifesting terror. This contrasts Poe’s earlier detective works in which his female detective characters subverted gender norms in a positive light (Burke 50). Poe’s Gothic literature, however, like in “The Black Cat” where the traditional view of women as symbols of





innocence and beauty is juxtaposed to the violent nature of the wife's death and the discovery of her grotesque, decaying body. This adherence to gender norms is what amplifies the terror of two already violent and horrific scenes. Poe also challenges gender norms within this story by the wife's challenging of her husband, attempting to stay the narrator's hand from murdering the cat. However, it is this challenge that ushers to the climax of the story; whereby, the narrator manifests his egoistic masculinity, redirecting his rage upon the wife. Similarly, the challenging of traditional gender roles through the possession of intellectual dominance over the male narrator by the female character in "Ligeia" creates a sense of unease throughout the story. The narrator makes this point clear when he says that "the

acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding; yet I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a childlike confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage," revealing his unease at her intellect which both surpasses his own capabilities as well as society's expectations for women (Poe 30). Her resurrection, as with Madeline from "The Fall of the House of Usher," can be viewed as rejections of the typical ideals of female passivity, and become sources of terror within these stories. As can be seen in the examples of these three stories, Poe utilizes gender norms to evoke horror and uses deviations from these norms as sources of tension.

Whether the female characters of Poe's stories are adhering to or deviating from conventional gender norms, there is a stark contrast in the power dynamics between them and their male counterparts. In "The Black Cat," the narrator exerts physical dominance over his wife by means of abuse, highlighting how egoistic masculinity gives rise to horror. Moreover, the premeditation and secrecy in the narrator's attempt to conceal his wife's body reflects his exertion of egoistic masculinity in her murder, contradicting his deflection of responsibility (Shehabat et al. 360). Contrarily, it is Ligeia who possesses power over her husband through intellectual superiority; however, her sense of agency throughout the story is undermined by her only being perceived through the eyes of her husband. Lopes argues that this intellectual superiority is associated with the "maternal female body" as a "site of death," furthering the sense of unease that her agency poses to the male dominance in the

story (Lopes 43). The entombment of Madeline in “The Fall of the House of Usher” signifies Roderick and the narrator’s control over her existence, suspending her in a liminal state of life and death as a means of inducing dread. In each story, the female characters are either dominated, undermined, or controlled by their male counterparts, emphasizing how they are reduced to objects or Gothic mechanisms.

By focusing on the stories, “The Black Cat,” “Ligeia,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” it can be seen that Poe’s use of female characters as mechanisms of terror, such as by being buried alive or murdered, along with his highlighting or challenging of gender norms, reflects his tendency to subvert a woman’s agency. By highlighting women’s subjugation and contrasting traditional gender norms with themes of death, decay, and supernatural resurrection, Poe reduces his female characters to mechanisms of conveying terror. By examining these tendencies through a feminist lens, insight can be gained into how Poe’s stories either contribute to or challenge the gendered constructs in Gothic literature, as well as its influence on today’s society.

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